



Djibouti

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution, while declaring Islam to be the state religion, provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, proselytizing is discouraged.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in the society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of approximately 8,450 square miles and a population of approximately 650,000. More than 99 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. There are a small number of Catholics, Protestants, and followers of the Baha'i Faith, together accounting for less than 1 percent of the population. There are no known practitioners of traditional indigenous religions. Because all citizens officially are considered Muslims if they do not adhere to another faith, there are no figures available on the number of atheists in the country.

The sizable foreign community supports Roman Catholic, Protestant, Greek Orthodox, and Ethiopian Orthodox churches.

A small number of foreign Christian missionary groups operate in the country, including the Eastern Mennonite Mission, Red Sea Team International, and Life International.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution, while declaring Islam to be the state religion, provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, proselytizing is discouraged. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full, and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

Although Islam is the state religion, the Government imposes no sanctions on those who choose to ignore Islamic teachings or to practice other faiths. The Government maintains diplomatic relations with the Vatican.

The Shari'a Court has been replaced by the Family Court, which was practically implemented in February 2004. This court uses laws from both the Family Code and Shari'a to rule on matters related to the family such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance.

The Government requires that religious groups register with the Ministry of the Interior by submitting an application to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which, along with the Ministry of the Interior, investigates the group. Once approved, the group signs an initial 2-year bilateral agreement detailing the scope of the group's activities. Unlike in previous years, Baha'i members reported no incidents of discrimination but did not confirm whether the organization submitted a request for registration during the period covered by this report. In previous years, such requests have been refused.

Foreign clergy and missionaries are permitted to perform charitable works and to sell religious books. These groups, which focus on humanitarian services in the education and health sectors, reportedly faced no harassment during the period covered by this report. Foreign missionary groups are licensed by the Government to operate schools. Religion is not taught in public schools.

The country observes the Muslim holidays of Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, the Prophet Muhammed's birthday, the Islamic New Year, and the Ascension of the Prophet as national holidays.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

There is no legal prohibition against proselytizing; however, proselytizing is discouraged for non-Muslims.

Islamic law based on the Qur'an is used only with regard to family matters and is administered by the Family Court judges. Civil marriage is permitted only for non-Muslim foreigners. Muslims are required to marry in a religious ceremony, and a non-Muslim man may marry a Muslim woman only after converting to Islam.

The Ministry of Muslim Affairs monitors the activities of Muslims, but it does not restrict their religious practices. The Ministry of Muslim Affairs has authority in all Islamic matters, including mosques, religious schools, and religious events. The High Islamic Council, officially established within the Ministry in October 2004, is mandated to give advice on all religious issues and concerns. It also is in charge of coordinating all Islamic non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the country.

The President is required to take a religious oath at inauguration; however, other government employees are not required to do so.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. However, representatives of the Catholic, Protestant, and Ethiopian Orthodox churches as well as some nongovernmental organizations noted an increase in animosity towards non-Muslims in recent years. Moderate Muslim clerics attribute the rise in Islamic fundamentalism in part to the international media, Saudi Wahhabi schools, the growing number of Islamic groups, and graduates of Saudi Arabian or Yemeni Islamic schools.

French Catholics and Ethiopian Orthodox Christians have been part of Djibouti society for almost a century and are an example of the considerable familiarity with and tolerance of other faiths by the Muslim majority. There are no legal repercussions for conversion from Islam to another religion or for marrying outside of Islam; however, converts may face negative societal, tribal, and familial attitudes towards their decision.

Approximately 60 percent of the population is ethnically Somali. In the ethnic Somali community, clan membership has more influence over a person's life than does religion. Ethnic Somalis who are Christians often are buried according to Islamic traditions by relatives who do not recognize their non-Muslim faith.

There is no formal interfaith dialogue. The Catholic Church organizes an annual celebration with all the other Christian churches. The Qadi has received Ramadan greetings from the Pope. He meets with the heads of other faiths only at government-organized ceremonies.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. Embassy representatives periodically meet with leaders and members of religious communities and with U.S. nongovernmental organizations with a missionary component.

The U.S. Embassy hosted several Iftars during Ramadan and a Christmas lunch to promote religious tolerance and understanding. Guests included prominent women in society, military counterparts, influential businessmen and government officials, members of the Arab business and diplomatic community, and Embassy employees. The Embassy has engaged several of its English Language Discussion Groups in discussions of religious freedom and tolerance. In cooperation with the religiously affiliated association Al-Biri, the Embassy also organized a Ramadan Information Session to educate American military supervisors of local staff working at Camp Lemonnier on the customs and practices of Ramadan.

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